

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DR JANIL PUTHUCHEARY, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR
COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION, AT ASIAN FACT-CHECKERS NETWORK (AFCN)
CONFERENCE ON 24 MAY 2024, 10.15AM**

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Members of the Asian Fact-Checkers Network

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Introduction

1. Good morning. I am pleased to be here at the inaugural Asian Fact-Checkers Network Conference. I would also like to extend a warm welcome to all participants who have joined us for today's conference, and for contributing to ongoing efforts to tackle misinformation and disinformation.

2. There is no doubt that misinformation and disinformation are urgent problems that societies must address, now that digital technologies have become an indispensable part of our everyday lives. With high levels of internet connectivity today, individuals can access a vast amount of information from anywhere, at any time.

a. In Singapore, more than 80% of residents use the Internet to find information¹.

b. Globally, over 60% of the world's 5.35 billion Internet users cite "finding information" as one of the top reasons for using the Internet².

3. Even as we welcome the ease of access to information enabled by digital technologies, we must also recognise that not all information available through these technologies is factual or reliable.

a. Online channels, including social media platforms, can be sites where falsehoods spread rapidly and widely. Misinformation can thus go viral before it can be countered.

b. Recent advances in technologies such as Generative AI have made it very easy to produce false content, such as deepfakes, at speed and scale. These can be hyper-realistic and difficult to distinguish from genuine content.

c. I recently returned from Seoul, Korea, where I participated in both the AI Safety Summit and the AI Global Forum organized by the Korean authorities. This is a testament to the concerns that governments and states have regarding the implications of AI-driven technologies, which are giving rise to tangible worries surrounding safety and access to sensitive information in our online

¹ Singapore Digital Society Report (2023).

² Digital 2024 Global Overview Report (2024). Link: <https://wearesocial.com/sg/blog/2024/01/digital-2024-5-billion-social-media-users/>



transactions. Hence, there is a pressing need to convene such gatherings to share best practices, as well as to initiate the development of norms and standards. This is something that governments are concerned about, and are coordinating across jurisdictions to start to develop these ideas.

- d. In Singapore, deepfake videos that feature our political leaders promoting scams have appeared in online ads on social media platforms. Elsewhere in the world, deepfake technology has been misused to spread falsehoods or manipulate public opinion about ongoing wars such as the Israel-Hamas conflict, and even undermine election integrity.

4. As a small, multi-racial and multi-religious society, Singapore is particularly vulnerable to the threat of online falsehoods that deepen fault lines and polarise society. Also, our ability to thrive and succeed hinges on being open, including being open to ideas that are hosted online. Hence, we cannot afford to unplug from the global digital economy, especially when other economies are pursuing strategies to be more digital. Therefore, it is imperative to engender trust within our society towards the services, products, and platforms we engage with so as to safeguard the infrastructure of fact, a cornerstone of cohesion and trust in society.

5. In Singapore, we take a whole-of-society approach to combatting misinformation and disinformation. There are four major areas, or planks, in our strategy. Although I list them in a certain order, I firmly believe that all four planks of our strategy hold equal importance.

The Singapore Government takes a strong stance against misinformation and disinformation and has put in place targeted legislation to deal with them swiftly.

6. The first plank is targeted legislation to deal with online falsehoods swiftly.
 - a. In 2019, we introduced the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, or POFMA. POFMA empowers the Government to issue Correction Directions to counter online falsehoods, requiring a government clarification to appear alongside it. The public can read both the facts in the clarification and the falsehood, and make up their mind on the truth of the matter.
 - b. During the COVID-19 pandemic, POFMA was critical in our battle against the ensuing infodemic. About 55% of POFMA cases then were debunking falsehoods related to COVID-19, ranging from vaccine efficacy to treatment methods.³ The value of this approach lies not in the quantity of falsehoods we debunked, or the number of correction notices issued. Instead, it lies in the continuous trust our society has maintained in the use of vaccines, the strategies that we have taken, and the channels through which we disseminate

³ Between 2020 and Q1 2023, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 55% of POFMA cases were COVID-19 related. Data retrieved from the POFMA Office website (https://www.pofmaoffice.gov.sg/files/tabulation_of_pofma_cases_and_actions.pdf)



information. We do not take pride in the number of notices, or the number of compliances being put up. However, we should take pride in how this approach, combined with other strategies that I will discuss, ensured that throughout the pandemic, public trust in our media channels, information sources, and healthcare measures that the experts were providing remained very high, and I think this success is a testament to the effectiveness of this approach.

- c. In 2021, we introduced the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act, or FICA, to counter potential hostile information campaigns launched by other states against us to spread disinformation. This helps to ensure that Singapore politics remains only for Singaporeans. It is one of the few aspects in Singapore that could be considered akin to an ideology, that our politics are for us to decide on, debate on and settle on by ourselves.

The Singapore Government has also invested in technological capabilities to identify and combat online harms.

7. To complement legislation to tackle misinformation and disinformation, we have also invested in developing technological capabilities to deal with online harms. This is the second plank.

- a. Just last week, Minister Josephine Teo launched the Centre for Advanced Technologies in Online Safety, or CATOS. CATOS will receive a total of S\$50 million in funding over five years under the Smart Nation and Digital Economy domain of Singapore's Research, Innovation and Enterprise 2025 Plan.
- b. Through the work of CATOS, we are strengthening Singapore's overall capacity to monitor and tackle the growing array of harms in the online space. These include online discrimination and hate speech that threaten our multi-racial and multi-religious and cohesive nature of our society.
- c. The technological solutions developed by CATOS will complement our regulatory efforts and ground-up initiatives to build a safer online space.

Citizens can play a role in addressing falsehoods.

8. While legislation and technological capabilities are important measures, it is also crucial for us, as individuals, to strengthen our resilience against falsehoods. With the ability to recognise information that may be false or misleading, we can not only make informed decisions about the content we consume, but also support efforts to stem the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

9. This leads me to the third plank on public education to empower citizens to critically evaluate information and protect themselves against falsehoods.

10. In Singapore, our libraries play an important role in equipping individuals to be discerning producers and consumers of information.



- a. Under the S.U.R.E programme, which stands for Source, Understand, Research and Evaluate, the National Library Board (NLB) has developed resources and organised activities to educate Singaporeans about the dangers of misinformation. Through this programme, Singaporeans also learn skills to recognise false information and fact-check online content, which may be AI-generated.
- b. These resources are also covered under the Infocomm Media Development Authority's (IMDA) Digital Skills for Life (DSL) framework that was launched earlier this year. This framework identifies a set of digital skills for Singaporeans to carry out day-to-day tasks online, including how to stay safe and smart online.

11. Just as learning to perform basic digital tasks like logging in and accessing services is crucial, understanding how to assess facts and employ critical analysis to distinguish truths from falsehoods is as foundation as any other set of digital skills. That is how we are trying to educate our public accordingly, utilizing resources such as libraries to provide the necessary tools for this essential skill set.

Partners in the information ecosystem, including fact-checkers, play a critical role in the battle against misinformation and disinformation.

12. I will now move to the final plank of Singapore's efforts to tackle misinformation and disinformation: leveraging the strengths of partners in the information ecosystem.

13. In a saturated information landscape awash with content that may be AI-generated, audiences may find it difficult to separate truths from falsehoods. Hence, we have to work with partners in the information ecosystem to effectively combat misinformation and disinformation.

14. One partner is our local news media platforms such as Straits Times, CNA, and our vernacular outlets. They play an important role as trusted interlocutors to engage and inform citizens on issues of the day, providing a factual basis for public discussions. Their ability to remain trusted by our public is a testament to the work that they put in despite ongoing attempts by various malicious actors to exploit the online space for a variety of reasons. Shout out to our teams here who have been able to maintain and strengthen the trust that the public has in them as a timely and authoritative source of information that citizens can turn to, to verify dubious information they might have encountered elsewhere.

15. Another partner is our network of fact-checkers, which includes many of you here today.

- a. We recognise that providing high-quality fact-checks is extremely resource-intensive, which makes it challenging for fact-checkers to work alone. This is why collaborations amongst fact-checkers are important, to synergise efforts to address falsehoods.



- b. I am glad to see that the Asian Fact-Checkers Network (AFCN) has brought together fact-checkers and stakeholders from diverse sectors, including the Government, technology companies, the media and academia to connect as well as exchange knowledge and best practices with one another.
- c. I hope that through platforms like this conference, you will forge new partnerships and initiate new cross-sector collaborations, which will enable us to strengthen our collective response to misinformation and disinformation.

16. Beyond the important work that the Asian Fact-Checkers Network is doing, I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of new players in our fact-checking ecosystem. It's not an easy space to get into, and the fact that people are willing to step forward and bring their resources, personnel, and efforts to bear in this space is something to be applauded and acknowledged. Thank you all very much for joining us in this effort.

Conclusion

17. Let me conclude by reiterating that work to safeguard our infrastructure of fact has never been more critical.

- a. Without adequate measures to address the threats that misinformation and disinformation can pose to societies, we run the risk of greater polarisation and erosion of trust.
- b. But if we work together and draw on the strengths and expertise of different stakeholders to collectively address this issue, we will sustain cohesion and nurture a more informed and resilient society.

18. I thank Black Dot Research for providing this platform to share ideas and best practices on tackling misinformation and disinformation and hope that you will have many insightful conversations later.

19. Thank you.

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